

Radical Middle Way Transcripts

Globalised Before Globalisation



By caravan, sea and on foot, Muslim traders spread wealth and faith throughout the world - from the Silk Road to the Sahara. Their good conduct and savvy business acumen helped create great societies. Their peaceful ways won people over. In an age of so-called "disaster capitalism" what is the role of Muslim business people in bringing good ethics and a spiritual consciousness back to what has become a dog-eat-dog world?

The Forgotten Legacy of the Muslim Trader

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**Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad on:
'Globalised before Globalisation: The Forgotten History of the
Muslim Trader'**

BismAllah Al-Rahmān Al-Rahīm

[Opening du'ā]

I've been considering some of the larger features of the architecture of the Sīrah recently and I find – and I'm sure most Muslims find this when they open its pages – an extraordinary immediacy to the story that it tells.

Some stories – classic stories – of course are timeless; people are still enthralled by Homer, by Shakespeare, but the Great North Legends. There's something different when we look at the Sīrah of the Prophet (saw) as well as being a great yarn, it seems to leap out of the pages at us with an alarming immediacy.

Sometimes when I get a moment or two to think, I try to work out what it is that makes that story so immediate. In the context of this meeting one might invoke most obviously, something that's very obviously there – hard wired into the logic boards of the Prophetic drama – but which we tend not to think about, which is that we take the story to a cosmic struggle between 'The One' – *la ilaha ill Allah* – and the superstitious many of the Arabs.

We take it to the heroic story whereby selfishness in terms of local, tribal vendettas which had been plaguing Arabia for a thousand years are replaced by the principle of a single law applicable to everybody. We tend to think of it in those terms – in terms of Tawhīd and in terms of shari'a. But there's another dimension that was clearly important to many of the protagonists themselves which is an economic dimension to the sīrah.

When you consider the divine wisdom in sending the seal of the Messenger (saw) to that, then and there you recognize first of all, the magnitude of the divine estimation of the man (saw) because he really was up against it. Sent to a people *mā unthira abā'uhum* – whose forefathers had not been warned, taking them from one end of the religious spectrum – polytheism – to the other end – monotheism; taking them from lawlessness to strict lawfulness; taking them from a belief in nothing in particular to a belief in life after death, so, many extraordinary challenges he met and successfully faced. But one of them that we tend not to focus on is the fact that the divine wisdom sent him to a community that was mercantile.

We think of the 7th Century Arabs as wondering Bedouin hanging about the desert, stories around the campfire not caring too much about higher things. But the reality of the sīrah is that it's essentially an urban story, and it's a tale of two cities, and the *hijra* is a city from a mercantile, plutocratic immoral elite, to a new space that is to become a zone for the *muhājirīn* and for the *masākīn* and for the poor and for the *mustad'afīn*. We tend to ignore this as Muslims frequently, that the reason for the struggle is for the *mustad'afīn*, not for waving a particular flag, but for the *mustad'afīn* – for those who are made weak.

So he sent the Prophet (saw) to – we can't really use the word 'capitalist' because it's so long ago – but to a strongly mercantile, selfish, detribalising community – the Qureysh. That is where the divine wisdom has chosen to place this final, Jewel – like soul.

And we find this is a community where tribal ties are breaking down; religion is not taken seriously by too many people. It's kind of like modern, Western religion – it's a civic religion – you have your own faith, your own little community, and your own little festivals, and your funny little superstitions stories. In the public space, what counts is money and certain types of civic relationships. The religious thing is kind of like 'your tribe does this, and your deity does etc. we don't care if you're worshipping *Al-'Auza Armanāt* or *Hubal*, it's really the public concern. What really is the centre of the city of Mecca and what people really worry about is the economic reality. If you threaten that then you're really a trouble maker.

Mecca before Islām is the city in where Umāya ibn Khalaf can walk past the Ka'ba with his entourage of feudal servants and slaves, and there be no legal contract at all between them.

The Prophet (saw) is sent to that people, and it's no coincidence that his message begins among the victims of that unjust economic order. Who are the victims? The woman and the slaves are the ones being trampled upon – they're at the bottom of the heap and they're the ones who first start to respond. That is axiomatic in Prophetic religion. That's where the truth tends to spread – not with the rich and the powerful and the prestigious and the famous, but it's the broken-hearted – the *munkasirāt Al-Qulūb* – whose hearts are broken by the weight that is pressed upon them by people whose main concerns are farming an extra dollar.

That's why sometimes in the West – in America for instance – sometimes you hear Arabic expat communities saying 'why don't white people become more Muslim?' because they see all these black people and Hispanics coming into the mosque and they get anxious – they'd really like to see more kind of people like me [Audience laugh]. When you ask them why, they don't have a terribly good way of expressing what's actually in their hearts. There are issues of race there, there are issues of self-esteem, and there are some not very nice attitudes that bring that about. But the reality is, if you look at the *sīrah* and you look at the Prophetic nature of divine providence in the ages, that's where the spiritual wealth is distributed.

In an unrealistic, competitive, cruel, computer-obsessed society – it's amongst those people that you will find the soft hearts that will respond to the truth. The African – Americans, the Hispanic Muslims, in Australia there are more Aboriginal converts to Islām than there are white converts to Islam despite the demographic disparities. Latin America – it's in the flabella's that the religion prospers, that's the reality of Tawhīd. Those are the people to whom it appealed, primarily only of course because its destiny is universal. And sometimes those Arabic ex-patriot communities driving their Mercedes and living in the exurbs and really hoping that people assume they're white – don't really like to be told that. Often Muslims are just as uncomfortable to be told what the *sīrah* is really about, as non-Muslims. Because it isn't about Middle class complacency it doesn't say you can't have a car and you can't have a decent income, and you can't succeed. It's not a monastic aesthetical tradition that turns its back on the world. But it does say very sternly that it's with the people, whose hearts are broken that Allah is with, *anā 'aīnd Al-munkasirāti qulūbahum* – 'I am with the broken hearted', as He says (swt) in the hadīth qudsī. That's where you expect truth to exist.

And in this country that's what a lot of people can't understand. They can't get that some middle-class guy in a big cathedral who goes to Church once a year on Easter Day, might actually not be who God is interested in. And that God is actually interested in precisely the people whom the establishment, ethos and all of the media are least respectful of, which is the toothless old Bangladeshi in the mosque in Brick Lane, which is really where the deep process of spiritual self-noting and the remembrance of Allah (swt) is taking place.

That's the radicalism of the Prophetic vision. It doesn't say revolution; it does say, revolutionise the way in which you categorise people. A luminous heart is much more likely to be the old Bangladeshi housewife in the tenement building than the stock broker in his BMW, who sometimes goes to a revivalist Christian Meeting.

That's the nature of Tawhīd and this is a stern, absolute, Prophetic teaching. Allah is with the oppressed Israelites, not with *Far'ūn*. Again and again these stories are to remind us of that uncomfortable fact. I find it uncomfortable.

I recently calculated that I'm endlessly grumbling about my academic salaries – we always do – because we work so hard and we do such important things and we get so much less than the doctors, so it's obviously wrong, but actually I'm in the top 1% of global earners; I told my children and they kind of respected me a bit more when they heard that [Audience laugh] although it didn't affect their pocket money.

That's the reality, but where the divine regard truly is, is with those people whom the system really has no time for at all, or regards them as backward people, sexists, homophobes, fundamentalists, useless immigrants, asylum seekers – the most despised people are likely to be where the divine pleasure is most likely to be found.

So where does this leave us? It leaves us contemplating the fact of the *hijra*: the Prophet (saw) is sent to this mercantile community and his opponents are all millionaires of their time; hard hearted plutocrats. What they really want is not for him to say 'you can worship your God, as long as you let us worship ours.' But their deities are linked inextricably to this oppressive system. Their deities are unable to inspire them with the long term vision and the humanity and softness of heart that enables them actually to do something about the people in the street selling the Big Issue.

In our context we have the same sort of Umay ibn Khalaf-type of arrogance, except in our system which is so brilliantly designed; we tend to sweep away from our sight, the reminders that there are victims of the system we have created.

One of the consequences of globalization is that we don't see the poor; the poor are the 'third world' doing the jobs which we have farmed out to them. Why have call centres in London when you can open one in Bangalore and pay them 5% of what you pay them in the UK? And it doesn't matter if they burn out because they're being worked too hard, they're not unionized, they have mental problems, you never get to see that, you just get the nice Indian voice selling you a mortgage, saying '*Hello, I am Sebastian*' [Abdul Hakim Murad imitates an Indian voice; Audience laugh].

You don't know that he's probably really suffering and he's not allowed to talk to you because there's an inspector wandering to see they're on the case all the time and there's a million other Indians outside waiting to take that job. It's not very nice.

We all know about Nike shoes and the consequences of globalization. Occasionally these break surface in order to prick our complacency, but generally not enough to make a real difference. We talk about 'trickle-down economics' and eventually the 'third world' will become like us, but there is the other paradox: the other obsession of Umayyad Khalaf is that 'I have a million dinars, next year in shā' Allah, I'll make another million,' and it goes on forever.

And we Muslims tend to be the same. In Abu Dhabi we've got a seven star hotel so is it possible to have an eight star hotel? How many more stars can there be? It's an infinite process because human ambition, human vanity is endless, and we're never really satisfied.

The hadīth says, *low kana lil insāni wādin min dthahab l'temenna an yukūna lahu wādiyan.*

If a man had a valley of gold, he would wish that he had two valleys. That's our nature.

The process of wealth-creation is *halāl* because it's Allah's *rizq* and we're grateful for it – there are *adāb* – and we have a great mercantile civilization has Habib Ali indicated. These are people who couple the *da'wa* with making a living, but there are limits. There are limits.

The problem with the modern system is that there's nothing about it that can ever suggest that there's a limit. Somebody comes up with a book sometimes, like Fred Hirsch's book *Social Limits to Growth*, which points out that after a certain point people don't get happier, as they get richer. And some of you might have seen the headline just two weeks ago where everybody was trying to figure out why it is that although we're twice as wealthy in this country as we were in 1968, by the conventional indices which of course is basically material indices even, we're actually less happy.

So what exactly do we mean by progress? How much further can it go before we get even less happy and we're working much harder are messing up the environment at an ever-increasing rate. Is there something in the system that can genuinely put the brakes on that, and push us into a new, less-greedy, less crazy circle of destruction and increasing - it seems – unhappiness?

Secularity can't because secularity only knows matter, and take matter away from it, it's diminishing. Religion is the alternative to that. All the world's great religions are alternatives to that.

The *sīrah* gives you a particular vision because of all of the foundation stories of the world religions, the one that is clearly couched in terms of doing something practical for the *mustad'afīn* and for the outcast, doing something practical about an oppressive economic order doing something practical about the fact that human beings eventually become diabetics and it's not ideal. That there is an alternative and

the alternative is the *hijra* to Medina, where an extraordinary different image of humanity is created.

Not a welfare state or the state taking over things that should be a free gift of soft human hearts, not that at all; but rather a society where you don't see the *mustad'afin* unsupported. Where the *muhājirīn*, when they came from Mecca, immediately the *Ansār* give them half of what they have; half of my house is your, half of my wealth is yours, extraordinary things that you would never consider. That's the vision he had (saw) the *hijra* is an economic and social fact, as well as a political and 'tawhīdic' fact. It's about moving from unrestrained consumerism and greed, to a social vision in which people genuinely have a reason to make social sacrifices.

Now, it's time to pray Maghrib and I'm not going to detain you much longer. But the moral of what I'm saying is clear. The internal logic of the system, however efficient, and however ethically sensitive it may claim to be, the internal logic of an ultimately material system is one of endless expansion, and more growth.

We know that there are physical and environmental limits to how much more growth there can be because the resources of the planet are finite.

There is something insane about a model of growth: the West is endlessly pressing on the 'third world' because if those third world countries and Thailand and Zimbabwe and Malawi and all of those places had Western lifestyles and levels of consumption, the global environment would collapse over night. We are urging on the third world something that if they actually did, it would kill us all. That's the lunacy of the system. So we need a long term wisdom – a Prophetic wisdom – we need a prophetic wisdom that is based in these two great principles of the *sīrah*, one of which is *zuhud* – us being happy with little – a very, very un-modern ethic – but something that all of us detect at certain times. At Ramadan for example, and genuinely make a sacrifice, and somehow when we lose something and we've given it to a good cause - when we've not experienced a pleasure - we feel something deeper, more calm in ourselves.

The other principle is the principle of the *mustad'afin* – the weak and the outcast who have always been at the centre of the monotheistic message, because Allah (swt) is God of Justice as well as a God of Mercy, and for both of those reasons, he commands us however successful we might be, in our legitimate *halāl*, mercantile pursuits, to put them at the centre rather than the margins of our concerns. And if the Muslim World, particularly, wealthy people in the Muslim World, actually put this into practice, rather than just endlessly getting angry about the American Empire building or Palestine – if they put that into practice, if even 1/10 of the wealthy in the Muslim World actually paid their zakat - most of the problems in the Muslim World would be overcome and you would see something of the beauty of the Medinan alternative that would overcome so many difficulties in our communities and the knots in our hearts.

So we ask Allah (swt) to soften our hearts, soften the hearts of the wealthy, and to give us true inspiration from this economic dimension of the *sīrah* of the chosen one (saw).

Al-salām 'alaykum wa rahmat Allah

Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad

Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad is one of Islam's leading thinkers today. He graduated from Cambridge University with a double-first in Arabic in 1983. He then lived in Cairo for three years, studying Islam under traditional teachers at Al-Azhar, one of the oldest universities in the world. He went on to reside for three years in Jeddah, where he administered a commercial translation office and maintained close contact with Habib Ahmad Mashhur al-Haddad and other ulama from Hadramaut, Yemen.

In 1989, Shaykh Abdal Hakim returned to England and spent two years at the University of London learning Turkish and Farsi. Since 1992 he has been a doctoral student at Oxford University, specializing in the religious life of the early Ottoman Empire. He is currently Secretary of the Muslim Academic Trust (London) and Director of the Sunna Project at the Centre of Middle Eastern Studies at Cambridge University, which issues the first-ever scholarly Arabic editions of the major Hadith collections.

Shaykh Abdal Hakim is the translator of a number of works, including two volumes from Imam al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din*. He gives *durus* and *halaqas* from time to time and taught the works of Imam al-Ghazali at the Winter 1995 Deen Intensive Program in New Haven, CT. He appears frequently on BBC Radio and writes occasionally for a number of publications, including *The Independent*; *Q-News*, Britain's premier Muslim Magazine; and *Seasons*, the semiacademic journal of Zaytuna Institute.

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